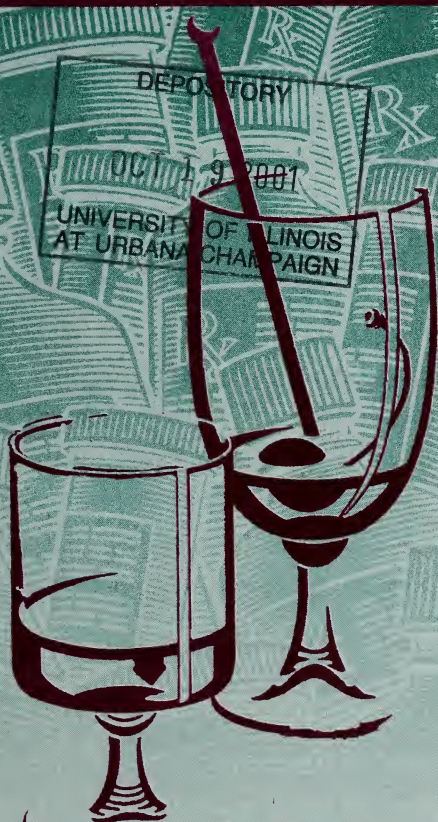


362.299  
A218X

# Alcohol and Prescription Drug Misuse Among Older Adults

Understanding the Risks of  
Combining Alcohol with Prescription  
and Over-the-Counter Medications



Illinois Department of Human Services

## **These are the facts about combining alcohol with prescription and over-the-counter medication:**

**Any use of alcohol in combination with prescription drug and over-the-counter medication carries risk**, and older adults are particularly vulnerable to harm. In fact, older adults experience more than half of the reported harmful drug reactions that lead to hospitalization. So, if you answered “yes” to the questions in both the prescription drug and alcohol categories, you might be putting yourself at risk for:

- unfavorable drug reactions, such as excessive drowsiness, fainting, impaired breathing, nausea and vomiting, increase in stomach irritation, rapid heartbeats
- overdose
- addictive effects
- interference with how well the medical condition is controlled
- possible change in the effectiveness of the drug.

Have you experienced any of these reactions?    Yes ☐    No ☐

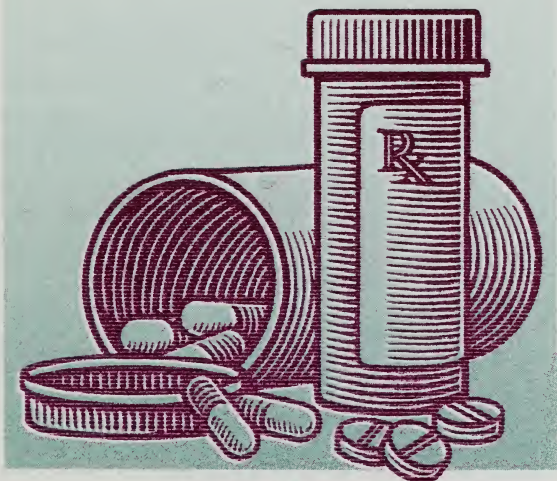
List the ones you have experienced:

---

---

The fact is, aging affects how the body responds to alcohol. When people age, their metabolism slows down and alcohol and drugs remain in the body longer. This results in an increased risk of overdose. Also, this change in the metabolism prevents older adults from processing the alcohol through the body as well as they did when younger, and so they become intoxicated quicker. At this stage in life, the same amount of alcohol that previously had little effect now can cause intoxication.

Sustained drinking that leads to intoxication eventually slows down reaction time, causes confusion, loss of balance and coordination, and drowsiness. These conditions may be responsible for some of the car accidents, falls, and other injuries that trouble older adults.



Finally, the interaction of age-related physical changes and the consumption of alcohol can trigger or worsen serious problems and cause the following:

- increased risk of high blood pressure and heart problems
- increased risk of strokes
- decreased capability to combat infection and cancer
- increased risk for cirrhosis and other liver diseases
- decreased bone density
- increased risk for depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems
- increased risk for malnutrition
- increased risk for sleep disorders

Lifestyle changes in aging also can make people more vulnerable to alcohol use as they face potential isolation and loss of mobility. This vulnerability increases as older adults undergo key life transitions (menopause, retirement, death of a spouse) or as they take on new and stressful roles, such as caring for an ailing relative or young grandchildren. These changes create situations where drinking alcohol can seem a comfort and a way to relieve the stress or loneliness.



## What can you do?

Now you are aware of the ways in which aging affects your body's response to the combination of alcohol and medications. You also know where you stand relative to this behavior. If you decide that you need to make some changes based on this information, here are some suggestions:

- Stop using alcohol and make note of the differences in your general well-being.
- Take this brochure to your health care provider and discuss the information as well as the notes you made. Follow their advice and keep them updated on improvements and changes.
- Discuss this information with family members and share any concerns you might have about your health with them. Let them know that you plan to stop drinking, and ask for their help and support.
- Find alternatives to drinking alcohol.
- Get help from your physician or health care provider if you feel you cannot stop drinking on your own.
- Share this information with friends in your age group.

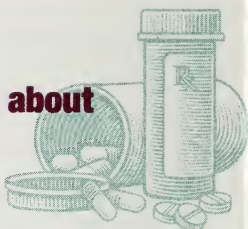
# Alcohol and Prescription Drugs

## Understanding the Risks of Combining Alcohol and Prescription Drugs

The number of problems associated with combining alcohol and prescription drugs is growing among older adults and it is important to understand that aging affects the way the body processes alcohol. Often, they confuse the effects of alcohol with other symptoms more common to aging. This information, which highlights some of the risks to health, well-being, and prescription treatment.

**These are the facts about medication use.**

**Where do you stand?**



**Some 80 to 86 per cent of adults over age 65 reportedly suffer from one or more chronic conditions or diseases.**

Do you? Yes ☐ No ☐

**Adults over age 65 take more prescribed medication than any other age group; 30 per cent of this population takes 8 or more prescription medications daily.**

Do you take medication daily?

Yes ☐ No ☐

How many prescription drugs do you take daily? \_\_\_\_\_

**More than any other age group, older adults use over-the-counter medications, primarily for pain.**

Do you use over-the-counter medications?

Yes ☐ No ☐

How many over-the-counter medications do you take daily? \_\_\_\_\_ monthly? \_\_\_\_\_ yearly? \_\_\_\_\_

362.279  
Al 18x

# g Misuse Among Older Adults

## h Prescription and Over-the-Counter Medications

The interaction of alcohol and prescription medications can be a cause for concern. Many people do not realize that alcohol may respond to medications and to the use of alcohol for senility, dementia, depression, and anxiety. With this in mind, please take heed of this information so you might unknowingly endanger your health regimen with the use of alcohol.

### These are the facts about alcohol use.

#### Where do you stand?



**One recent national survey showed that about 50 per cent of adults over age 65 drink alcohol.**

Do you? Yes ☐ No ☐

**This survey also showed that approximately 25 per cent of adults over age 65 drink daily.**

Do you? Yes ☐ No ☐

**Periodic heavy drinking (5 drinks or more on one occasion) and regular heavy drinking (more than 2 drinks for men and 1 drink for women per day) were common among the people who answered the survey.**

Is this a common practice with you?

Yes ☐ No ☐

How many drinks do you have daily? \_\_\_\_\_

How many drinks do you have on any one occasion? \_\_\_\_\_

# **If you have questions about alcohol or other drugs, call:**

**Illinois Department of Human Services**  
Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse

**1-866-213-0548 (toll-free Voice)**

**1-866-843-7344 (toll-free TTY)**

If you have questions about other Department of Human Services (DHS) programs or services, call or visit your local DHS office. We will answer your questions. If you do not know where your local DHS office is or are unable to go there, call:

**1-800-252-8635**

1-800-447-6404 (TTY)

**Illinois Department of Human Services**

Bureau of Customer Inquiry  
and Assistance

**Monday through Friday**

(except state holidays)

**Quick Answer System hours: 7:30 a.m. - 7 p.m.**

**Representatives available: 8 a.m. - 5:30 p.m.**

For answers to your questions,  
you may also write:

**Illinois Department of Human Services**

Bureau of Provider Assistance  
and Correspondence

100 South Grand Avenue, East  
Springfield, IL 62762

Visit our web site at:

**[www.state.il.us/agency/dhs](http://www.state.il.us/agency/dhs)**



Programs, activities and employment opportunities in the Illinois Department of Human Services are open and accessible to any individual or group without regard to age, sex, race, disability, sexual orientation, ethnic origin or religion. The department is an equal opportunity employer and practices affirmative action and reasonable accommodation programs.

**DHS 4637 (N-9-01) Elder Drug Misuse Brochure**

Printed by the Authority of the State of Illinois

14,000 copies